

25 January 2009 * “What They Dreamed Be Ours to Do”

© Rev. Erika Hewitt * Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Unitarian Universalists are heretics, have always been heretics. Or so they tell us, and so we proclaim, using the word as a proud banner. What form, exactly, did the heresy of our ancestors take? Are we still heretics? Is it something we should strive for?

I'll get to those questions in a moment, but first: a confession. I'm not wild about the label *heretic*. Its origin is descriptive – “heresy” comes from a Greek word meaning “to choose” – but to my ears, *heresy* is both an archaic word and one that carries a stigma. It was, after all, a word used by the orthodox to accuse and persecute our religious ancestors.

For centuries, both our Unitarian and Universalist forebears indeed *chose* – sometimes upon pain of death – to push back when they encountered doctrines and definitions that constrained them; chose to step outside of orthodoxy; chose to risk voicing hope that was otherwise unspeakable. Their religious beliefs were not “unspeakable” in a metaphorical sense, but in a literal one.

What I want you to remember, even before I describe them to you, is this: in the years when our Unitarian and Universalist theologies were being shaped and voiced for the first time, those choices were not just bold, “but also incredibly dangerous.” Sandra Fees¹ reminds us that

Anyone who openly disputed orthodox beliefs was branded a heretic and in danger of persecution. Those who held Unitarian and Universalist opinions were among them. They were burned at the stake, ex-communicated from the church, or run out of town on threat of violence.

Jack Mendelsohn² elaborates, “A strain of violent persecution” runs through “all the early history of liberal religious impulses within the Christian fold...Tragedy and death stalked those who first laid the foundations in Europe of the movement that was to bear the Unitarian and Universalist names.”

What belief could be so radical, so threatening, that its expression in religious community would be punished by death? The heresies of our people will seem mild to your 21st century ears, but they were nothing of the sort in their time. Our ancestors tilled the brittle earth of dogma, working the spiritual soil for generations, so that we could enjoy the fertile beauty of Unitarian Universalism. They were driven by their choices – yes: their “heresies” – and guided by their vision of *what could be*. “We are heretics,” explains Mark W. Harris,³ “because we want to choose our faith, not because we desire to be

rebellious.”

The restlessness and rebellion of our Unitarian and Universalist pioneers didn't stem from antiauthoritarian impulses, but rather from a bold willingness to see beyond, to go beyond, to form new ways of being in relationship with God, and with one another. Both strands of our history – the Unitarians, whose faith answered the question *Who was Jesus?*, and the Universalists, whose religion was a response to the mystery *What is our relationship, as human beings, to God?* – arose from a willingness to question, to challenge, the status quo... and to imagine what might *take its place*.

Our Unitarian story began even before we were given that name. “Anti-Trinitarians,” as they were known, denied the doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus, they insisted, was not God, not fully divine, but *human*. In the mid-1500s, a physician named Miguel Serveto (or Michael Servetus) wrote several Anti-Trinitarian books, including one called *On the Errors of the Trinity*. His views offended virtually all Christians, but especially John Calvin. Calvin had Servetus burned at the stake in 1553, but unitarian ideas had already made their way to Poland and to Transylvania (where Unitarian churches thrive today).

Elsewhere in the religious fabric, our Universalist story was taking shape. The idea that God was benevolent, and would offer salvation to all people, was an old idea – the seeds had been planted in the 3rd century by Alexandrian philosopher Origen. (In fact, my colleague Jeremy Taylor points out⁴ that “Universalism is a global heresy.” There are heretic Universalists of many religious strains.) By the 1800s, Universalist Christianity was sweeping across Britain and then the United States.

Early Universalists chose to defy the notion that some human beings are “saved” and others condemned. They challenged the notion of a God whose love would include some people, but exclude others. Their gospel of universal love compelled Universalists to embody that all-encompassing love of the Holy by reforming society around them – *re-forming* earth as the kingdom of God – in the form of orphanages, hospitals, schools, and abolition efforts. They opened circles of belonging and worth to those whom others had cast out.

A third heresy provided common ground for our Unitarian and Universalist stories. Theologian Rebecca Parker⁵ explains,

Our liberal religious roots are in protest against a despairing and negative view of the human being. The nineteenth-century Universalists and Unitarians objected to the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, which thought the human being was so wounded and fraught with sin at birth that a person could not be trusted to do what was right, comprehend what was just, or discern what was true... Our forebears claimed a more positive

view. They said that we were born with capacities for good and evil and possess a whole array of gifts and abilities...

This radical trust in the possibility of every person was echoed later by one more person we might call a “heretic.” In the 19th century, Ralph Waldo Emerson taught the Unitarian community – which he had already left – that there is more than one way to know what is right, and what is true. In an era when Biblical teachings – and their narrow interpretations – were the sole authority, Emerson urged people of liberal faith to “trust thyself.” By allowing our individual experiences to transcend Biblical literalism, Emerson invited the chorus of human voices to create new names – new images – for right and wrong, for the Holy, for justice, for love.

Hear again this small constellation of proud, guiding moments in our UU story. Listen for the religious imagination behind these bold choices:

☆ a choice to view Jesus as a truly good, a prophet of great power in word and in deed, but not divine. Not God. The choice to believe that there can be – there *will* be – other leaders like Jesus; that we can know the presence of God through other members of our human family.

☆ a choice to be guided by love, and to trust that the entire human family is held in love: a love that never lets us down, never lets us go, and never lets us off the hook.

☆ a choice to view each human being as created whole, rather than broken.

☆ the choice to interpret my individual experience – and yours – as a source of truth and guidance.

Are we UU’s *still* heretics? It depends on who you ask. Despite four centuries of Christian roots, there are ways in which we UU’s are considered beyond the pale of Protestantism. Clearly, there are religious communities that would disagree with all of the theological positions that I just named.

As you heard earlier⁶, Rev. Carlton Pearson lost a church of 5,000 people when he began to preach Universalism instead of the threat of hell. There are people who pray for me because I’m not “saved.” And I assure you that, today, there are churches in Santa Barbara that don’t even recognize me as a minister. There are people of faith who vehemently oppose our Unitarian Universalist support of marriage equality and our practice of ordaining gay, lesbian, and transgender ministers – let alone of *welcoming* gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people into our sanctuaries.

I'm proud that our inclusive and loving faith compels us to model acceptance of all people. But is it *heresy* to do and believe these things? I've already told you that I won't use that archaic word to describe this 21st century minister. We don't risk enough to *earn* that label, for one thing; our choices, however liberal, don't trigger the weighty consequences that our ancestors faced. It seems a vestigial identity, not to mention cheap grace, to call ourselves "heretics."

Then there's this: I fear that the label of heresy is a red herring, leading us to confuse its cause and its effect. In my UU peregrinations, I meet people and congregations whose core identity rests on being the outsider, the agitator, the rebel. That's who we've been in the distant past – and the *recent* past (as in, the past eight years) have reinforced our lonely self-perception as being on the fringe, and the loudest voice on the left.

If we're living in an Obama presidency, perhaps we're also living in a post-heresy world. Perhaps our task, as progressive people of faith, is to touch base again with the holy fire that first ignited our religious imagination; to dare one another to dream of new possibilities, and what might *become*.

This is not the time, as evangelical mega-churches are packing 'em in at their espresso bars, for liberal congregations to fence themselves off in self-satisfied corners, or to grow complacent. This is our time to be (to stay!) on the leading edge of change; it's a time to invite in those who are seeking a spirituality, a theology, that dove-tails with their activism and makes visible a community of hope.

This is who we are: a people who make room at the table. Our Unitarian and Universalist stories have primed us to – as they did – open circles of belonging and worth to those on the margins. Our stories also call us forward, into what might still be, as we shape the world.

May we not just walk in the heretical footsteps of those who came before us;
may we *live our faith*; hoping their hopes, and sealing them true.

Endnotes

1. "Heroes and Heretics: Our UU Story," a sermon by Rev. Sandra Fees.
2. In *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age*, p. 60.
3. In "Unitarian Universalist Origins: Our Historic Faith. See www.uua.org/documents/harrismark/uu_origins.pdf
4. Jeremy is quoted/paraphrased by Leland Bond-Upson in "Universalism," a s sermon delivered to the UUs of Petaluma on November 10, 2002.
5. "Something Far More Deeply Interfused," in *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*, pp. 96-7.
6. During the Message for All Ages, I shared the story of Rev. Carlton Pearson. You can hear his story here: http://www.thislife.org/Radio_Episode.aspx?sched=1159